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ABSTRACT

This study investigated what motivated principals to seek professional development and criteria they used when reflecting on their professional development experiences. It explored how they conceptualized the implementation process of their inservice experiences and noted why they chose specific professional development programs and how they used acquired knowledge. Graduate students interviewed elementary principals who had participated every year for at least 3 years in a professional development program. Before the interview, principals completed questionnaires on demographics, work situation, three professional development programs in which they participated, reasons why they participated, program usefulness, quality of training, and how training supported their professional learning. The interviews collected more detailed information on the same topics. Data analysis indicated that principals wanted to know more about some innovations before acting on them. Principals valued inservice programs that provided information confirming their personal theories. Most principals valued chances for informal networking during inservice activities. Principals wanted a balanced blend of information, demonstrations, practice, reflection, and discussion about implementation problems. The most effective inservice training method involved the principals and all of the teachers participating in an inservice program. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Valuable in-service training: evaluation by principals*

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INTRODUCTION

A valid analysis of new roles and demands for principals implies an understanding of the changes in the political and educational policy context. Further more, a clear understanding of the demands and constraints facing principals is crucial for research as well as for training purposes. Even an incomplete overview of recent legal and curriculum changes in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium gives many indications that most principals are continuously confronted with a 'turbulent policy environment' (Vandenberghe, 1995; 1998). A new national system of regular school inspection was introduced by law in 1991. Before 1991 one inspector visited a single classroom and gave feedback to one particular teacher. In other words, only the individual professionality of a teacher was assessed. Now, a group of three or four inspectors visit the school for one week during which time they not only observe classroom activities but also interview teachers, the principal, and students, and analyze documents. A few weeks later the school receives a report on the inspection. The main focus of this 'audit' approach is no longer the individual teacher but the school as an organization, the collaboration among team members, the leadership qualities of the principal, and so on.

Linked to this new inspection system is a network of external change facilitators. One of the expectations is that schools, based on the evaluation report, should create a systematic and, if needed, continuing collaboration with one (or a team of) external change facilitator(s). In addition to legal requirements for inspection, in 1995 a new law for primary schools asks schools to develop a 'local school work plan' and a 'school plan for in-service training'. Finally, a list of national standards has been published indicating the minimum goals to be achieved by each primary school. This publication

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has resulted in the development of new curricula and schools are expected to implement these curricula in the coming years.

One major implication is that a principal must be simultaneously an 'interpreter of new laws', a 'program manager', an 'instructional leader', and, according to another point of view, a 'transformational leader'. Are we looking for ordinary people or for some exceptional gods? This multi-dimensionality of the principalship is observed in many countries. It is not easy to grasp the real consequences of this multi-dimensionality for the daily ongoing practice of principals and the development of supportive training programs, but it is easy for outsiders to underestimate the complexity of principals' tasks.

Policy changes at the national level and also the development of educational priorities by the Ministry of Education move control and decision making from the central office to the local school level. Or to phrase it in more realistic terms, on the level of "political rhetoric", policy people explain frequently to school people, that the local school has nowadays more freedom to develop a local policy. How this increased local autonomy is implemented and to what extent school leaders are experiencing this new "educational freedom" is still a matter of 'slogans'; there are actually only a few indications about the use by principals of this opportunity (Kechtermans & Vandenberghe, 1998).

Anyway there is the expectation that the principal, in collaboration with teachers and parents make decisions and local plans. But at the same time there is also the demand for the principal to maintain a high level of performance (see the new inspection system).

All these and other expectations have, we assume, a serious impact on the way a principal is experiencing his or her tasks and how principals are conceptualizing their role (see also Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992; Tanner & Stone, 1998). And at the same time we believe that, given this new and changing policy context, principals will assess very critically the professional development programs and activities offered by several agencies.

Changing policies and the introduction of centrally proposed innovations, is complemented by the national authorities, with an offer of various types of professional

development programs for principals and opportunities for local support. This means that professional development of principals is increasingly viewed as a fundamental ingredient of successful school improvement. In a recent policy statement, the Minister of Education (of the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) reconfirms the importance of the principal as a local change facilitator. Establishing a stable system for professional development of principals is seen as a central component of educational reform. The government provides extra money for different types of in-service programs for principals. The necessity to support principals on their work is considered to be a "policy priority". Underlying this policy there is the assumption that by enhancing the management capacities of principals, the quality of the teaching activities at the classroom level will also improve. In other words, nowadays principals are offered many opportunities for "continuous professional learning", but as it is often the case, we believe that the "implementation barrier" – meaning implementing what one has learned during one or two in-service days – is underestimated.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As is explained in the previous section, principals are expected to become local school managers and change facilitators. They have the responsibility to look critically at the national educational priorities and to select very carefully some professional development programs that provide the necessary conceptual background and at the same time enhance their leadership capacities. Understanding the conceptual background of some innovations (for instance how to reorganize the classroom setting in order to take into consideration effectively the differences among pupils; how to deal with learning and behavioral problems; etc...) and at the same time translating all this in terms of an implementation strategy is indeed a very complex task. We know that the ability to acquire and use knowledge is highly dependent on context. In other words, for knowledge to be acquired, it must be used in some form, thus becoming a part of the user (Wilson, 1993; Scribner, 1999; see also Eraut, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is study what principals motivates to seek professional development and to describe and analyze the criteria they use when they reflect on their professional development experiences. Secondly, and linked to the first question, we also explore how principals, related to their in-service experiences, conceptualize the implementation process. In summary, why do principals choose some specific

professional development programs and to what extent and how do they use the acquired knowledge?

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Context

This study is part of a graduate course on 'Educational innovation and school improvement'. Students were asked to interview a primary school principal who was at least for five year principal in the same school and who took part every year, for the last three school years, in at least one professional development program. Each principal was interviewed twice. Before the first interview a questionnaire was sent to the principals selected by the students. In a first part of the questionnaire, using a structured format, the professional biography and the actual working context were described (based on a format developed by Kelchtermans, 1994). In a second part the principals were asked to give a short description of three programs in which they participated during the previous three school years, to give the main reason why they participated, to assess the usefulness and the satisfaction (on a 4-point scale) and to describe the three main learning results. In the last part, using a Likert-scale, the principals were asked to assess the quality of the in-service training programs for professional learning of principals. This scale is based on previous research by Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) on professional learning of teachers. They developed three indicators for professional learning: experience of a growing body of knowledge and leadership skills (for instance they are able to explain some events and to solve some unexpected conflicts); a growing ability to justify their decisions and activities; and thirdly being able to unravel unexpected and complex situations and to behave in a flexible way. So, principals were asked, using a four-point scale, to indicate to what extent they consider the professional development programs supportive for their professional learning (Cronbach's alpha of the scale: .95).

This questionnaire was used as a guideline for the first interview. The main purpose was to collect more detailed information, to gather additional explanations and to link this information with some import factors of the professional biography (for instance: can we explain why a principal has chosen a particular in-service program knowing that he/she has had some specific experiences as a classroom teacher; are there some specific indications about his/her personal theory about 'being a leader'; etc...).

In a next step this first interview was analyzed by the students. This analysis led to a first indication of the criteria principals use for the evaluation of in-service programs. But at the same time, this first analysis made clear that in many occasions we needed more information in order, not only to be able to describe the criteria, but also to explain why these criteria were considered as important and/or useful.

In order to collect this information, a second interview took place. During that interview – which took less time – questions were asked in order to construct the personal "interpretive framework" through which experiences are perceived and given meaning (for a more conceptual elaboration of this "interpretive framework", see Kelchtermans 1993). In other words: there was the assumption that the evaluation criteria principals used, were to some extent linked to a personal "interpretative framework".
After that second interview, a final analysis of each interview took place, also using the questionnaire data. For this paper, only these data that are linked to the research questions will be used.

A two-step-analysis

In order to collect valid and reliable information for answering the two research questions, in a first step 10 interviews and the analysis made by the students were reread. For each interview extended information about criteria used by the principals for the selection of professional development programs and about their personal conceptualization of the implementation process was collected. During this analysis interview data and interpretations were constantly compared. This inductive approach blends data selection, interpretation, looking for more general meaningful categories (types of criteria; issues related to the implementation process) and reinterpretations (Glaser & Strass, 1967).

In a second step 10 other interviews were analyzed in the same way. This approach created the opportunity to confirm first findings and interpretations but also to find additional relevant data leading to new categories and richer interpretations.
In a final step, the results of these two analyzes were integrated in a more general presentation of the findings (see below).

The principals

We used the data of 15 male and 5 female primary school principals. Most of the interviewed principals are experienced ones (table 1) and are working in schools with different number of teachers (table 2).

Table 1: Number of years as a principal

Years	Male	Female	Total
5-10	1	1	2
11-15	-	-	-
16-20	5	4	9
21-25	4	-	4
26-30	5	-	5
	15	5	20

Table 2: Schools: number of teachers

N teachers	Male principals	Female principals	Total
10<	-	1	1
10	-	-	-
11-15	6	2	8
16-20	6	1	7
21-30	3	1	4
	15	5	20

The professional development activities

As already said (see Context) the principals were asked to give – before the first interview took place – a short description of three in-service programs in which they participated during the three previous school years (one per school year). One way of looking at these spontaneously provided examples is to make a distinction between in-service programs that (1) are linked – or not – to centrally proposed innovations and (2) are linked to the classroom or to the school as an organization or management activities of the principal (see table 3).

Table 3: Types of in-service programs

	Directly linked to classroom activities	Linked to school organization or management activities	
Linked to central policy or centrally proposed innovation	A 28	B 2	30
Unlinked to any central policy	C 8	D 21	29
	36	23	59

Examples of *section A* are: a new assessment and follow-up system for pupils; a new language curriculum proposed by the umbrella organization for Catholic schools; a program and a set of activities for extending special needs provision in ordinary primary schools, etc... For *section B*: introduction about the official "attainment targets" (used as criteria by the inspection). Some examples for *section C*: implementation of a program for social skills in the classroom; re-arrangement of the classroom setting (providing several corners for pupil activities); implementation of a program for independent work; etc... And some examples for *section D*: how to assess my school culture; a program for communication skills; conflict management; towards more effective meetings, etc...

Although it was not always easy to make the distinction between the four types, it is clear that 50% (n = 30) of the spontaneously provided examples are linked to an improvement program proposed by the central administration or to a program or curricula developed and disseminated by the umbrella organizations. So, half of the professional concerns identified by the principals emanated primarily from extrinsic factors. Secondly, about 60% (n = 36) of the described programs are directly linked to teaching and classroom activities. This means that principals want to be informed about for instance the background, but also about the practical consequences of new assessment systems, new curricula and about how to change classroom activities in order to integrate special activities for pupils with learning problems on behavior disorders (which is a policy priority). It seems as if principals are looking for information

and strategies for supporting teachers who have to implement innovations in their classroom. And thirdly, looking at *section D* it is obvious that the programs which are not linked to centrally proposed and developed programs and activities, concern personal issues as well as issues related to the school level (n = 21). So, principals are also calling for help with their day-to-day professional practice as a school leader.

FINDINGS

During the interviews the principals had the opportunity to explain *why* they participated in the particular in-service activities they described, what kind of *criteria* they use looking back at their professional learning experiences when asked to evaluate the program and how they *conceptualize the implementation* process or the transition from knowing personally more about a program (or new material) to the classroom.

First knowing, then acting

This is a clear need for most principals *to know more* about some innovations and the necessary changes to be organized in the classroom. They want to *increase their knowledge* about the conceptual background and the main underlying principles. In a first step, they find it necessary to be informed about *the content* of a centrally proposed innovation. So, a frequently discussed criterium is the extent to which an in-service program provides clear conceptual information. An in-service program is considered useful and worthwhile *if it gives a good overview* of the content and the reasons why it is important to adopt that innovation.

This and other observations offer an indication about the ways principals think strategically and what their beliefs are about the way an implementation process can be supported. It is remarkable that most principals develop a "two-step-theory": first we must be informed and in a next stage we will present the innovation to the team and build up an implementation strategy.

This first result reflects a *particular task perception* of most of the interviewed primary school principals: first, I as a principal has to be fully informed before I start a discussion with my staff. "It is almost unthinkable to start an innovation process in my school, without having a systematic overview of the content of an innovation", one principal says. This also reflects a typical *pattern of professional relation* between the principal and the teachers: teachers expect that their principal introduces an innovation

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(almost always during a staff meeting); it is up to him to convince us; if it is not possible for the principal to explain clearly to us what the importance is of an innovation, how can he or she expects some extra efforts from our side.
We assume that this task perception and pattern of professional relation is to some extent induced by the way most of the professional development programs are organized. *Lecturing* is still one of the main teaching activities: the principals are expected to listen to a well-structured presentation, in some cases in combination with a demonstration and a discussion in small groups. But, from the description given by the interviewees it is clear that most of the time an expert gives a lecture.
This "two-step-theory" also gives an indication about the principals' conception of an implementation process. For most of the principals implementing an innovation seems to be a rational-linear event. "Rational" because they believe they can motivate and convince their staff by giving a good overview of concepts, principles, advantages of the innovation for the pupils, etc... "Linear" because full information comes first and only then it is possible to start some activities with the teachers.

Information, new knowledge: (re-)confirmation of a "personal theory"

It is a well-know phenomenon that experienced teachers and also principals have developed a so-called personal (subjective) theory (see for instance, Kelchtermans, 1993). Their personal experiences, linked to different professional situations are organized into a structured set of opinions and beliefs. This means that they have specific opinions about what "good education" means, but also what "effective leadership" means.
In about half of the interviews – and this second observation is linked to the first observation – principals told us that they value an in-service program if *it confirms what they already know,* but especially if they get information that *confirms their personal theory*. In some cases principals explain vividly that providing a theory and/or concepts structures their "intuition" (that is the word frequently used). And according to these principals this type of confirmation of their personal theory is an indication that they are working "in the right direction". But more important is the observation that all these principals also remark that, given this experience in some in-service activities, their self-confidence as an internal change facilitator grows and they have *the courage to start some implementation activities.*

Combining the first and second observation, one could conclude that, providing information (concepts, underlying theories, etc...) during in-service sessions, is more than increasing the knowledge level of a principal. In-service activities are considered useful and valuable if there are opportunities for a confrontation between "academic knowledge" and a "personal theory".

Networking: a very positive side-effect

One of the interviewed principals made a remarkable summary of a general feeling among all interviewed primary school principals: "Policy people speak about decentralization, increasing the local autonomy. But this is 'political talk'. There is a famous gap between these rhetoric and the daily problems we experience. On the contrary, the national policy creates more pressure than in the 80's; there are so many demands, so many expectations, so many improvement proposals, etc... Many in-service activities try to empower school leaders, but most of us feel actually powerless." This observation comes back in every interview. Another principal talkes about "an unmeasurable mountain of expectations and an ongoing decreasing self-efficacy feeling".

Given this observation, it is not suprising to notice that most interviewed principals value very positively the chances for informal networking during the in-service activities. An in-service program is then considered useful and worthwhile if the organizers *create room for the development of an informal network*. They value the opportunity to meet equals, to share professional but also emotional problems, to see that colleagues have the same problems, etc... And through this informal sharing activities, principals look in another way at their professional problems, are challenged to think critically about their school, accept alternative solutions for specific problems, etc...

So, the result is not for instance the implementation of a specific program or the introduction of a particular change in one or two classrooms, but rather a beginning attitudinal change: they approach differently team members; they appreciate efforts by individual teachers; etc...

Information, knowledge is important, but simulation of the implementation process is even more important

Eight principals told an interesting story in which both issues (criteria for the evaluation of an in-service program; conceptualization of the implementation process) are very well described and explained.
These principals find it important to be fully informed about the content of an innovation, but demand also a set of activities which are linked to the development of an implementation strategy. Unlike the first presented principals, they do not think in two steps, but value very positively an in-service programs where knowledge and future actions in their schools are systematically combined.

According to these principals an effective in-service program offers a presentation of an innovation in "practical language". By emphasizing "practical" they refer to a well-balanced combination of lectures, demonstrations, presentation of useful teaching materials, examples of "good practices", etc... "Practical" also means providing opportunities to practice some of the teaching activities teachers are expected to implement in their classrooms.
All these experiences allow the principal to imagine what it means for teachers to change their teaching role, to rearrange the classroom or to use new teaching materials. During the interviews the principals explained that this type of experiences almost immediately did rise questions about "how to motivate my staff and how to put this into practice?" In other words, there was an increased awareness of the implementation problem.
This increased awareness led (not always) to discussions about: how to present to our team what we have learned here; what kind of resistance can we expect; what type of supportive structures do we need in our school in order to start the implementation process; how can we visualize first results, etc...
Looking at the interviews, principals phrased several advantages of this type of in-service training: it creates a basis for the development of a locally adapted implementation strategy; it provides examples of specific actions useful for a principal who wants to start the implementation; it gives indications of expected positive and negative reactions from the staff; it clarifies to some extent the role of the principal

who is expected to be an internal change facilitator; and it gives an opportunity to communicate to the staff in "practical terms".

So, an in-service training is considered useful and worthwhile if the presentation of the content is combined with different activities allowing principals *to experience themselves what it means to use this innovation*, and if the organizers create room for *discussions about expected implementation problems*.

It seems as if this approach creates a very realistic attitude among the principals: this is an interesting innovation, but introducing conceptually my teachers in the innovation is not enough, we have to start some activities; we can expect resistance and problems, but this is a natural phenomenon; we have to accept that putting into practice of an innovation is a complex and difficult process that takes time. So, principals dare to start and to face unexpected events and reactions. In more general terms, we assume, that this type of in-service training results into less intense personal concerns (Hall & Hord, 1987; van den Berg & Vandenberghe, 1981), decreases the feeling of chaos and increases the motivation to do something coming back in the school.

Finally it is necessary to remark that we do not have reliable information about what principals actually did once they finished this type of in-service training.

School and team focused in-service training

Only four principals gave an interesting and rich description of an in-service program where all the teachers and the principal took part as a team. And for this four cases it is obvious that the team asked for training because of commonly experienced problems existing in the school. Consequently the team was also motivated for a program offering a potential solution.

These four principals enumerated several advantages of this approach: right from the beginning the team members use the same language and in the long run it creates a commonly accepted vision; what is learned during the workshops for instance, is recognizable for everybody; there is no transfer problem: in most other cases a principal who has been involved in one in-service program has to make the necessary "translation" before he can start in his school the implementation process. Participating as a team actually means that "implementing the innovation is part of the in-service training" as one principal said. And at last, this type of professional development put pressure on each individual teacher to implement immediately what has been learned.

So, an in-service training is considered useful and worthwhile if the team get *potential solutions for a commonly experienced problem* and if they can *implement these solutions almost immediately.*

But, this is only one part of the story. What does it mean when principals say that implementing the solution is part of the in-service training? One principal described nicely what happened in his school when they took part in an in-service program about 'learning difficulties and behavioral disorders'. The team had previously tried out several teaching activities (for instance: dividing the pupils into two groups allowing to pay more attention to pupils with special reading problems; introducing a system for formative evaluation, etc...), but there was still the feeling that the different initiatives did not solve the problem. So, the team decides to participate in an in-service training (six half days, spread over three months) where several techniques for diagnostic teaching were discussed and demonstrated. After the second session the team and each teacher individually decided to try out one particular activity: to present a formative test (arithmetic), to make an error analysis and to develop some material for remedial teaching. After two weeks, during a staff meeting these experiences were shared, different solutions for specific problems were compared and an inventory of practical problems was made. This inventory was then presented in the next workshop. We got similar stories from the three other principals.

Looking at this story, it is very important to emphasize the observation that *effective professional learning takes place in a social context.* Trying out new teaching activities means that a teacher has to change his individual behavior; an individual learning process takes place. But it is also obvious that changing routines implies a level of uncertainty; this creates a need for feedback and therefore teachers need a social context which provides solutions and suggestions for all kinds of problems.

At last, we were positively surprised by two observations described by one principal. As a result of discussions during the staff meetings about classroom activities, he noticed that teachers dare ask questions about professional issues and that they accept that other colleagues present their professional problems. Apparently, some 'cultural' changes took place in this school. And the same principal noticed that two teachers visited the classroom of a colleague, and according to this principal this was a very unexpected result. In more general terms this means that *individual professional learning is complemented by organizational learning or development.*

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Using a semi-structured interview, primary school principals got the opportunity to talk about three different in-service training programs. In one part of the interview they could indicate what a useful and worthwhile program is (criteria) and how they conceptualize the implementation process.

As expected many but also different types of programs were discussed. This variety lead to different criteria:

(1) most principals asked for a clear and structured presentation of an innovation (learning content; teaching activities and material; etc...). This information is necessary; only a well-informed principal is ready for the confrontation with the team. Having more knowledge is considered very important and necessary because a principal must be able to justify regularly this innovation when he has to work with a skeptical team. Thus, there is a clear indication that some in-service courses increase awareness of critical issues and provide principals a new way of looking at teaching problems. A well-structured analysis of an educational problem is considered by most principals as a tool by which they at least conceptually understand some solutions. Well-presented lectures facilitate formal learning. But at the same time, it comes as a surprise that they do not question the lack of well conceived linkages to transfer new knowledge to the school and the classroom (see also Bredeson & Scribner, 2000). Having more knowledge is for some principals politically and strategically important: they are able to use the exact language and concepts when teachers or parents ask questions about some teaching activities. And by doing so, they are perceived as "experts";

(2) linked – at least to some extent – to the first observation, we also concluded that some principals find knowledge important because their intuition or personal theory about education and leadership is confirmed. Information is considered useful because principals experience an enriching confrontation between "real life knowledge" and "academic knowledge" (see also, Richardson, 1990). This confirmation and confrontation motivates some principals to start the implementation process. Scribner (1999) remarks that: "In large part, current configurations of professional development activities continue to privilege the acquisition of types of knowledge favored in academic and policy context as opposed to the hot action of classroom realities" (p. 258). From our second

observation we learn that a confrontation between "academic knowledge and "hot action" is considered to be a worthwhile experience;

(3) a third observation concerns the room some organizers of in-service programs create for informal networking. There are some indications that this networking provides not only some emotional support, but also some attitudinal change. As a result some principals talk in a more relaxed way about implementation problems;

(4) some in-service programs provide a well balanced blend of information, demonstrations, practices, ongoing reflection, and discussion about expected implementation problems. This is very much appreciated by the interviewed principals: they are informed, they have experienced implementation problems and they know how to work with the staff;

(5) and probably the most effective way of in-service training is an approach where the principal and all the teachers take part in an in-service program. This is still an exceptional situation, but here "implementation is an essential part of the in-service training", which guarantees that indeed classroom changes take place. The more general meaning of this approach is very well characterized by Hargreaves (1997, p.1): "In the face of the global tendencies to force educational change through externally imposed restructuring and reform, we emphasized the parallel and often greater importance of improving the internal interactions and relationships of schooling".

Looking at some activities taking place in the school, we concluded that two concepts are linked: "professional learning" and "context of work". The relationship between these concepts is best described by Eraut (1994): "The fundamental relevance of a piece of theoretical knowledge depends less on its presumed validity than on the ability and willingness of people to use it. This is mainly determined by individual professionals and their work context, but is also affected by the way in which the knowledge is introduced and linked to their ongoing professional concerns" (p. 43). So, those who organize in-service training should not overlook the work context of principals and teachers and its influences on their behaviors.

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